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ABSTRACT

To analyze a case of discourse and social transformation, a study examined the 1950s coffeehouse movement and the "Beat Generation" which spawned the movement. While the coffeehouse/Beatism phenomenon was short-lived, the philosophical foundation of the movement was far more pervasive than is generally recognized. In addition to the history and philosophy of the movement, the study examined the role of social discourse as the basis for social change. Initially, this was a "conversation" based movement which focused on interpersonal relationships, but it quickly became "media's movement." The transformation of the coffeehouse movement provides a case study of the impact of media--particularly television--in the evolution of popular movements. For students, the coffeehouse phenomenon provides one of the first case studies in mediation effects. (Twenty-nine endnotes are included.)

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MEDIA AND DISCOURSE IN THE 20TH CENTURY COFFEEHOUSE MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The 1950s coffeehouses and the Beat Generation which spawned the movement are examined. While the coffeehouse/Beatism phenomenon was short-lived, the philosophical foundation of the movement was far more pervasive than is generally recognized. The history and philosophy of the movement are discussed, followed by an examination of the role of social discourse as the basis for social change. Initially, this was a "conversation" based movement which focused on interpersonal relationships but it quickly became "media's movement." The transformation of the coffeehouse movement provides a case study of the impact of media-particularly television- in the evolution of popular movements.

MEDIA AND DISCOURSE IN THE 20TH CENTURY COFFEEHOUSE MOVEMENT

The coffeehouse is a life line against compromise. Compromise to me is a synonym for defeat. Admittedly, an anti-conformist, adolescent attitude, but a good one. 1

The coffeehouse movement of the 1950s may seem to many a curious footnote which conjures images of black turtle neck sweaters and bongo drums. The coffeehouses and their habitues--the beatniks--may initially appear to be a short-lived phenomenon of little consequence historically. However, it is evident that this movement had a pervasive impact on the ideology of American popular culture and that it is a significant case study of discourse and social transformation. In support of this thesis, the history and purpose of the movement are briefly described, followed by a more detailed examination of the philosophical base. Next, the role of media in the rapid coalescence and dissolution of the movement is discussed. Finally, the impact of media upon the conversational context of social change is noted.

THE COFFEEHOUSE: HOW AND WHY?

Media coverage of the day reflected both an awareness of, and fascination with, the coffeehouse. In 1956, Newsweek reported that proprietors were optimistic that the longevity of the American movement would rival that of their English predecessors:

While conceding that the boom might subside slightly, coffee men in London and New York last week were insisting that they were here to stay. Only the beginning of another cycle that would last 200 years, they said. 2

However, in only a few years the movement was losing momentum. In 1961, Time provided a "hipitaph" for the group most closely associated with the coffeehouse phenomenon--the beatniks. "The Beat Generation has finally gotten what it always wanted--lost. About the only durable mark that the beatniks made on American culture is the coffeehouses that flourish in a dozen cities." 3 But, by 1962, a Business Week article, "Coffee House Urn Runs Dry" delivered a post mortem on the coffee house movement, as well. "It turned out to be only a fad... the coffee shop is going the way of the hula hoop." 4

The coffeehouse fulfilled a conversational need for a segment of society. Like bars or pubs throughout the century, the coffeehouse functioned as a meeting place. As one person stated, "I think that the people in New York are basically lonely. People come here alone. They come from small apartments. Suddenly they feel they are a part of something." 5 Another said, "I think of a coffeehouse as everybody's living room." 6 A city commissioner remarked while touring the coffeehouses, "Where I lived as a child, in an East Seventy-third street brownstone, we used to sit outside on the stoop on hot nights with the neighbors and talk to each other. That's the kind of thing they seem to have held on to down here." 7 For many the coffeehouse provided a place where

people could feel a sense of belonging in the "lonely crowd" of urban living.

THE NEW PHILOSOPHY

While the coffeehouses were obviously an extension of the desire for belongingness and a physical place for people to come together, these were not just conversations with a small c. These were Conversations about ideas formed around a literary movement--the philosophy of Beatism had emerged. The term Beat came from the fringes of society and described those who were "beaten" or defeated. The principal theme of this movement was one of alienation. This idea can be examined further in terms of issues of equality, identification as a movement, and conversational themes.

Popular movements and equality. The 50s movement, like the English coffeehouses and the French salons, must be viewed as a popular movement. The discourse of these movements became the seed of social transformation. The interchange of artists and intellectuals formed the nucleus of these movements, but the other participants varied to some degree. The 50s coffeehouse provided a meeting place for people who probably appeared to be a more diverse sub-culture at the time, than in retrospect. A waitress who was a graduate of a fashionable private school reported, "I've never known people like the clientele at this coffeehouse. They are the kind of people

who, if you're walking down a deserted street, make you cross to the other side." She reflected further, "It is good for me to work here, you can't spend your life crossing to the other side of the street." 8

Those who frequented the coffeehouses included the beatniks, artists, intellectuals, followers of trends, and with remarkable speed, the tourists. The underclass of society which participated was primarily those whose drug habits created an association with the "alienated" beats. The language of the beat came largely from the lexicon of these disenfranchised groups in urban society:

"Beat talk", a narrow and repetitive argot is mostly stolen from jazz musicians, narcotic addicts and prostitutes... it relies heavily on such words as "cat," "dig," "bug," and "cool," substitutes "spade" for Negro, "head" for narcotics user, and utilizes the word "like" as a means of beginning almost any sentence... The "Negro", it is true, is a hero to the Beat (as are the junkie and the jazz musician). 9

Yet, while there was a rejection of mainstream society and the accompanying materialism, the primary participants were members of the intellectual community... the "haves" who were making a conscious choice to be the "have nots." One chronicler of the beat scene in an issue of Life magazine reported that the mind set of the beat was as follows:

Hard core beats want freedom to disorganize and thus ensure full flowering of their remarkable individualities. They are often ill-fed, ill-clothed, and ill-housed, by preference. 10

Momentum and Identity. Popular movements and the popular arts linked with them have always had persuasive elements. 11 In the Beat movement, the persuasive elements coalesced to test the limits of freedom of expression. The initial issues linked freedom of expression with suppression by the status quo. The seeds of the "generation gap" were being sown as evidenced by the following observation in Musical America, "Any place where they (college students) may mingle freely with artists and intellectuals, is looked upon with a certain suspicion by their elders as a breeding ground for rebellion of all kinds." 12

The legal imbroglio arising out of this suspicion of the Beats and their gathering places helped solidify the coffeehouse movement. In New York City, police department law required a cabaret license for establishments which had food and entertainment. Additionally, entertainers had to be fingerprinted. Both the personal rights implications and the cost factors were an outrage to owners. The Figaro coffeehouse became a cause celebre when police broke up a performance of a Schubert trio and issued a summons to the owner. Eventually, the ruling was favorable for the coffeehouses, but the ruling served to heighten the sense of indignation since the court sidestepped the real issues by declaring that "serious chamber music could not be classified as entertainment under the meaning of the law." 13

The various coffeehouses such as the Figaro, The Bitter

End Cafe, the Cafe Bizarre, The Cino and the Cafe Wha? continued to offer a variety of art and theatre in New York City despite continued skirmishes with city officials. Famous haunts, such as, the hungry i and Six Gallery prospered in San Francisco. Poets Allen Ginsberg, Greg Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the novelists, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, became the voice of the beat generation and the coffeehouses became the stage for a philosophy which altered the country most certainly into the 60s and arguably well beyond.

Just think how different things are today from what they were when the Beats came along. Socially, culturally, even politically, the drift was set long before in their direction. The Beats simply managed to accelerate the pace so wildly that less than a decade after they had begun to amuse the readers of Time, Life, and Newsweek, America was so radically changed that those who had done the laughing could hardly believe it was the same country. 14

This transformation was reflected in an emphasis on youth culture, an awareness of the drug scene in middle America, a concern with self, and the theme of alienation from society.

The Discourse of Discontent. While the political and social challenges of the English coffeehouse brought disenfranchised groups into the mainstream in the name of social reform the thrust of the 50's was initially quite different. People who were in the mainstream chose to be disenfranchised. "Thus, say the Beats, the only way man can call his soul his own is by becoming an outcast." 15

This movement was a self-absorbed movement and the exiled and alienated looked inward.

In the coffeehouses one writer noted that there were conversational themes which "deliver sharp little blows to the nervous system." The common topical themes were the Confession, The Display, the Confrontation, and the Joke. 16 Formerly taboo topics concerning sex and feelings and previously taboo relationships were not only acceptable but chic. In short, coffeehouse society aspired to be unrepressed. "Things that are considered too shocking, too private, or too dull... are paraded here." 17

Poetry was also a form of conversation for the movement. Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" is probably the most well-known and controversial poetry from the era. However, the proliferation of Beat poets and Beat poetry was nearly synonymous with the coffeehouse experience. One reporter described the scene: "With tom-toms beating behind them, the soft, intense voices of young men fascinated their audience, who applauded lustily and chanted 'Yeah, man' after each rendition." 18

The coffeehouse was a place to talk, to have rapport, to dialogue. These were but a few of the terms which reflected the centrality of conversation to the movement. Through conversation participants explored "awareness", "feelings" and the "meaning of life." Conversation was the matrix of social

transformation but the journey was inward and oriented toward relationships, rather than outward and directed toward reform.

MEDIA'S MOVEMENT

The coffeehouse concept was not a novel idea and Beat philosophy owed much to previous intellectual movements. Thus, the momentum of the movement intrigued reporters of the day. They sensed that there was something extraordinary about this particular movement.

While most of the forerunners of Beatdom were ignored by the general populace, the Beat Generation itself has attracted wide public attention and is exerting astonishing influence. It is seldom out of the news for long.... 19

In retrospect, while the Beat Generation was fascinating, the "astonishing influence" of media on popular culture was the more significant event which was transpiring. Perhaps, Andy Warhol's often quoted statement that "in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes" applies to social movements as well. The rise and demise of the coffeehouse in the 50s was a case study for the beginning of a mediated society in which images and events became increasingly more transitory: lovers, families, politicians and social movements. Postman uses the metaphor of "now...this" to describe a fragmented world influenced by media's cadence.

This phrase is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world is mapped by a speeded-up electronic media. The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the previous matter (approximately forty-five seconds), that you must not be morbidly preoccupied with it (let us say, for ninety seconds), and that you must now give your attention to another fragment of news. 20

One reason for the rapid demise of the coffeehouse movement is perhaps that a mediated reality put this social phenomenon on "fast forward." As media changes form and allows information to be disseminated more rapidly, it follows that social movements evolve more rapidly through stages of formation, maturity and decline. Due to media coverage, coffeehouses became tourist attractions almost overnight. Not only was there an enormous amount of print coverage, but television was beginning to transform mass media once again. Ferlinghetti, delivered his poem "Christ Climbed Down" before the eye of the television cameras accompanied with a dance interpretation by a woman. 21 Rein observed, "What is noteworthy about persuasion-in-art today is that through technological innovation one presentation - a single song, a single dramatic performance - can be appreciated by millions of people." 22 Television created a new type of immediacy which involved the audience as they had never been involved before. They were now a simultaneous part of the event in absentia.

If widespread media attention changed the character of the coffeehouses, the profit motive finalized the metamorphosis... Suddenly, the Beats who were the core of the early movement, were no longer welcome at many establishments. Coffeehouses, by 1956 were already a \$5 million a year industry. 23 By 1961, as one Chicago host explained "There aren't enough tourists who can stand the creeps." 24 Another New York City coffeehouse bore a sign over the door which read, "DOGS, BUT NO CATS." 25

Media created an audience for the "coffeehouse scene" but the scene required participation not observation. The very heart of the movement was undermined by the interest in it. The era in which electronic media became the arbiter of popular movements had begun.

THE LAST CONVERSATION?

Now, media have arguably become the "conversational" cornerstone of our society. In many ways the media supplant the needs fulfilled by the coffeehouse and other historical meeting places which once provided fertile ground for social transformation.

So... where have all the coffeehouses, Beats, and poets gone? The answer may be found by asking where do we seek the neighbors in the brownstone, or the friends at the corner drug store? As early as 1956 researchers suggested that "para-social relationships" were an outgrowth of that newest of mass mediums: the television. 26 The new "meeting place" is surely around the television set. Not only is there the electronic eye most Americans gaze at nightly, but also there is the ubiquitous "talk show" with both studio audience and home audience. Another forum for "conversational catharsis" is talk radio. But the role of these "para-social relationships" in providing the benefits of true communion remains subject to debate. A recent article about talk radio

host Larry King notes:

He admits that because of his difficulty with intimacy, relationships with the real people in his life "play second fiddle" to his radio job. And perhaps that's true of his listeners too... No need to confront unpleasant feelings, no need to risk. Don't like what you hear? Flip the dial. 27

THE AFTERWORD

The social transformation which initially threatened to be revolutionary, in fact, turned out to be evolutionary and so subtle that few realized that the seeds were sown in the 50s coffeehouse era. Many of the issues for which coffeehouses had provided a forum, simply moved to the college campuses during the 1960s. Considering that many of the weekend coffeehouse attendees were college students this is not surprising. The gathering places for those enamored with introspection, the literary renaissance, alienation, flirtation with drugs and alternate lifestyles became less centralized, more diffused and significantly more widespread. Cook provided ample evidence that the impact of the Beat Generation reverberated long after the poets and coffeehouses fell silent. Furthermore he suggested the importance of this movement to American culture when he wrote: "The world wide movement brought forth by them--whether you call it Beat, hip, or underground was the first ever to originate in America." 28

The aftermath of WWII, the popularization of a new and ultimately pervasive media, a burgeoning middle-class and an

accompanying prosperity all contributed the social and cultural phenomenon of the Beat Generation. The 60s generation translated alienation into action with the anti-war movement but the Beat credo was alive in the 60s rhetoric of "dropping" and turning on," "questioning the establishment," and "doing your own thing." The decades which followed the 50s and 60s appear to be a further implosion into self-expression and self-absorption. Individualistic rather than civic impulses were attended to.

Conversational contexts have been integral to social transformation. While previously an exchange of ideas required a place for that exchange to occur, increasingly, our exchange is a mediated one. Some would argue that this is not an exchange at all. Rather, the public receives a barrage of ideas that cannot be tested in the give and take of interpersonal dialogue. People stay in their own living rooms and rely on an internal monologue. Should they find cause to venture forth, they go to the bars or the pubs which seem to survive in all circumstances and all centuries since their inception. There is evidence that the coffeehouse is undergoing a "rebirth" but anyone looking for philosophical underpinnings may be disappointed. The West Coast resurgence appears to be more of a social-life alternative than a life alternative. 29

The coffeehouse movement of the 50s had a far greater impact than those writing at the time ever imagined. The Beats gave voice to a sense of alienation which echoed across America. The media could not begin to assess accurately the effect this movement would have, nor could they realize that they too were integral to the transformation. Enough time has elapsed since the advent of television and the widespread use of various forms of media that it is obvious that mediation was transforming the way in which social movements evolved. Media created a "second stage" upon which the drama of social change was acted out.

Unbeknownst to the actors, the coffeehouse phenomenon was one of the first case studies in mediation effects. Presently, the impact of media, not just on social movements, but on historical conversational contexts is of great significance. Technology has altered where and how we relate to one another at all levels of society. In the future, social scientists may reflect upon the coffeehouse movement as The Last Great Conversation.

ENDNOTES

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- 4 "The Coffeehouse Urn Runs Dry," Business Week (August 13, 1960) p. 83.
- 5 "The Alluring cupful, pp. 86-87.
- 6 Nancy Lynch, "The square root of bohemia," Mademoiselle (June 1962) p. 127.
- 7 "Learning Greenwich Village" in Talk of the Town, 37 New Yorker (July 1961) p. 21.
- 8 Lynch, p. 136.
- 9 Paul O'Neil, "The only rebellion around," Life, 47 (Nov. 30, 1959) p. 116.
- 10 O'Neil, p. 115.
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- 13 Diether, p. 46.
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- 17 Lynch, p. 128.
- 18 Stanley Meisler, "Letter from Washington," The Nation (August 29, 1959) p. 100.
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- 20 Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (New York: Penguin, 1986) pp. 99-100.

21 O'Neil, p. 124.

22 Rein, p. 72.

23 "The Alluring Cupful, p.86.

24 "Hipitaph", p. 48.

25 "Hipitaph", p. 48.

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29 Tony Link, "Coffeehouses reborn as place to while away evening hours," Amarillo Globe News (October 1989) p. 3E.